The Richards Group Incident Is Outrageous in Many Ways

The advertising industry as a whole is failing—failing to diversify teams in an authentic way.

This week, we saw Home Depot and Motel 6 step down from working with The Richards Group after its founder, Stan Richards, made racially fueled comments. While I don't condone what Richards said, there's something bigger going on here. Instead of instantly canceling the agency, let's have a conversation about the issue at hand.

I'm never satisfied when I see someone's life or livelihood destroyed because of a personal comment. I'm not outraged by the "too Black" comment that Richards made. I'm outraged that he viewed Motel 6's demographic as white supremacists and continued to work with them.

As society as a whole faces a reckoning on how to be better allies to communities of color, it's time that ad agency culture reflects that, too. However, this industry's diversity should be more than just a buzzword that we use when serving clients. It should reflect our agencies themselves.

I have seen it all. As far as microaggressions, I'm pretty sure I've heard them all, too. From being asked to participate in a monthlong RFP process only to find out late in the pitch process that we were only brought in as a token agency to not being able to pitch in meetings due to my accent. Now, I realize these experiences must not be unique to me. Other minority creators, too, likely have been belittled due to either explicit or implicit bias.

For agencies and brands alike, the benefits of diversity go beyond just the optics of having diverse leadership in new business meetings. Employing diverse management is proven to increase overall value by as much as 19%, according to a study by Boston Consulting Group. That same survey additionally found that having a diverse team does more than just boost overall positioning in best workplace rankings; racially and ethnically diverse teams are 35% more likely to perform better.

While the lack of diversity in the advertising industry has been present for years, this has been especially apparent this year due to the amplified racial tensions in our world. Agencies should take a step back and reflect on the makeup of their teams. It’s not just hiring a chief of diversity; it’s giving a range of viewpoints a meaningful seat at the table responsible for day-to-day decision making. We’re not just fighting for diversity; we’re fighting for equity. When your agency lacks diversity, what culture are you actually speaking to? Marginalized voices set the culture we appropriate in ads today. Let them dictate how it’s expressed. Brands should hire agencies with that in mind.

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